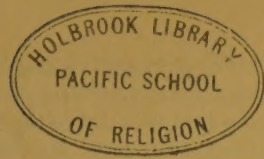


The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



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DEAR MEMBER,

In the French national resistance to Hitler a leading part is being taken by Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. The movement of resistance is inspired by patriotic, cultural and Christian motives, and the first two are stimulated and powerfully reinforced by the third. The movement includes, as M. André Philip indicated in his recent broadcast, those of very different social origins and political opinions—socialists and conservatives, devout Christians and determined free-thinkers. The common resistance is forging close bonds between those who take part, and in particular between Roman Catholics and Protestants. It is, in fact, the Christians who in large measure are furnishing the movement with a philosophy or rather a theology.

THE RESISTANCE OF FRENCH CHRISTIANS TO NAZISM

On the Protestant side, a set of eight theses, known as the "Theses of Pomeyrol," though they have not been officially adopted by the Reformed Church of France, have been widely circulated and provide a bond of union between French Protestants who are opposed to any collaboration with Hitlerism. The theses assert that there is one Lord of the Church and the world, Jesus Christ, who is Saviour and King, and that it belongs to the Church to pronounce a judgment on concrete situations, whenever the commandments of God, which are the foundation of all community life, are in question. They remind the State and society of the demands of truth and justice which God makes upon the whole community, and of the mission of the State to assure to each citizen a regime of law, guaranteeing essential liberties and excluding unfair discrimination, spying and arbitrary dealing. They make a solemn protest against legislation which casts out the Jews from human communities, and conclude with the following declaration:—

"Laying aside all equivocations the Church affirms that it is impossible to describe the necessary submission to the conqueror as an act of free choice. While accepting the material consequences of defeat, the Church considers resistance to all totalitarian and idolatrous things as a spiritual necessity."

There has also reached this country the text of a striking sermon, preached in a Protestant Church in unoccupied France. You will note how skilfully an incident that took place twenty-seven centuries ago is used to illuminate present experiences, and with what deep feeling love of country is given its true religious setting. The subject is the story of Ahab and Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings xxi). The following extracts indicate the line of treatment:—

"They are elementary things, indeed, which are brought before us in this story, things which appear to be self-evident. And we are on the threshold of a world where perhaps they will not be so self-evident. . . . Social order and justice, the rights of property, the protection of the law for all men are not things which exist on their own authority and are self-sustained. They are an order of things willed and given by God.

"Ahab, King of Samaria, suddenly becomes aware of an imperious and irresistible desire to take possession of the vineyard of Naboth. And it is quite natural. It lies close to his house. It would be ideal for a vegetable garden. It undoubtedly forms part of his 'living space,' or if one prefers, of 'his sphere of influence.'

“ ‘No, Ahab,’ Naboth replies, ‘man is not like a beast whom you can lead from one pasturage to another. This vineyard is the place where I grew up. It makes the horizons of my childish years, it is the land of my fathers, my own home country. This and none other. You could never replace it for me. My father taught me to recognise every nook, every tree, every stone. My soul took its colour from it. My happiness is wrapped up with it. No other vineyard means anything to me. Only God’s direct orders could make me leave it.’

“Ahab knows that Naboth is within his rights; rights of Naboth, which are really the rights of God, dominate him—yes, dominate Ahab, Ahab the King, and that he is only king in order to be the chief servant of these very rights. He knows it, and that is what makes him desolate.

“ ‘Ah! if only God could cease to exist, if we could for one moment suspend His will! If the rights of the weakest could be suppressed! If I, the King, could only do what I want! If I were indeed the King and not only the servant of the Lord! If only Naboth, just one among all my subjects, were not free to stand for his rights against mine that would be fine, but that cannot happen.’

“Yes, that is just what could happen. And it does happen in the form of Jezebel—some one who has the courage to assert that God does not exist and that, in consequence, the rights of the weakest do not exist. She will force all his fortified lines because she is nothing else, this Jezebel, than the completion of Ahab’s own sin, the sudden, devilish incarnation of his dream. ‘If only God did not exist. If only I possessed the final authority.’

“One cannot say that either Ahab or Jezebel was any better than the other. But there is this difference that we cannot forget, and which is not of small importance, namely, that for Ahab, whether he likes it or not, the rights of Naboth do still exist, while for Jezebel they simply do not exist. The refusal of Naboth cannot cut short her desire because this refusal signifies literally nothing for her, she ignores every right except the right of the state, every right except her own right to do what she will. Jezebel is not under the law, she is entirely outside and above it. There is the new and unbelievable fact: some one has arrived for whom nothing exists outside her own will; for her the state is above the law.

“The affair is liquidated. Who could still think that the rights of Naboth existed? That the God of Naboth is still alive and that His Word is not in bondage to our iniquity? Who would dare to think that the story is not over? (Then follows an account of the intervention of Elijah.)

“Let us rejoice then if, even now, the prophet Elijah speaks to us through the story, the Word of God, if it means that we are not Jezebel, that we can still escape her fate. We are perhaps Ahab, we are perhaps one of the notables of Jezreel. But by the very fact that the Word rings in our ears there is for us some hope of being saved, there is for each of us the possibility of becoming Naboth, the man who is a prisoner to the order of God, the man who will not give up the heritage of his fathers, the man who will not renounce his vocation and his responsibility, the man who holds on to his vineyard not primarily because of its memories of childhood or for the gallons of good wine that he draws from it, but primarily for the hidden treasure that is discovered there, the treasure of the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. There is the great treasure which Naboth cannot yield at any price.

“The vineyard of Naboth is indeed, for each one of us, our hearth, our work, our country; but primarily the treasure of God’s promises that are hidden there. The rights of Naboth which we can at no price renounce are our rights to live worthily from the fruits of our labour, our right to bring up our family, our right to love our country and to desire its honour and liberty. But primarily, and conditioning all the others, there is our right to await and to proclaim in season and out of season the coming of God’s Kingdom. Yes, there is the vineyard of Naboth, the heritage of his fathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, there too is our vineyard, our heritage forever, in spite of all the Ahab’s and all the Jezebels of the world. Amen.”

The majority of the Roman Catholic bishops in unoccupied France have taken a line of grim resistance. Cardinal Baudrillat has no imitators in the free zone. M. André Philip, who is one of the leading Protestant laymen in France, an economist and formerly the socialist deputy for Lyons in the French Parliament, has reported that the best of Catholic France is with the resistance movement. A series of printed pamphlets and leaflets is being secretly issued under the title, Papers of Christian Witness (*Cahiers du Temoignage Chrétien*). Their aim is to make clear to the people of France what is at stake, and to unite all who are willing to co-operate in a common spiritual front against Nazism.

A remarkable testimony to this movement is borne in one of the secret broadsheets of the Protestants, which has decided to cease publication in order to make common cause with the Roman Catholic effort, as a rallying point for all the forces of resistance. It says :—

“The militant Catholics have taken in our country an important, and we do not shrink from saying a preponderant, place at the head of the movement of resistance, in which they have very often taken the initiative and of which they continue to be the inspirers.”

One of the recent pamphlets of the *Témoignage Chrétien* says in its preface :—

“The waiting of France is not indifference or inertia, but a silent preparation for hastening the day of liberation. The silence of the nation, which is, with its suffering, the only possible form in which in the present circumstances it can express its fidelity, condemns in advance to failure the New Order of Hitler and the illusions of co-operation under the sign of the swastika.

“The Frenchmen who suffer to-day in body and still more in soul, and who long to save what is more precious to them than life—the honour and liberty of their country, and with it the honour and liberty of humanity—are waging the same battle as the Christians who, at the same time that they are witnessing to their faith, are struggling to safeguard the highest and most universal values which are menaced, like France itself, by the triumph of Hitler.

“Readers will not be surprised that the *Témoignage Chrétien* oversteps confessional boundaries. Our fight is that of the Christian conscience—indeed, simply of conscience.”

The pamphlet reproduces a number of documents of high authority confirming the will to resistance and showing that such resistance is “the good fight,” in which there can be no armistice and from which any defection is treason. These documents include a letter and an address by Karl Barth, pronouncements by the German Roman Catholic Bishops and by the Dutch Bishops, the three famous sermons by Bishop Galen of Münster and a sermon by the Lutheran Bishop of Würtemberg. The pamphlet also launches a vigorous attack on various attempts in Catholic quarters to palter with the issues and to betray the cause of Christianity and humanity, and concludes as follows :—

“To Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* we oppose *Notre Combat* (our fight), for we know, and will make known, that in the issue of this fight there are at stake, without any possible doubt, all the reasons for living, and, further, that there can be no peace with Hitler that is consistent with French, human or Christian honour :—

“because Hitlerism means domination, pride and falsehood, and above all contempt of man—contempt of justice and of goodness, of the weak and of fidelity ;

“because the religious and racial persecution of Nazism is the most crafty and stubborn ;

“because the German neo-paganism signalises the devaluation of Christian values and compels the Church to repudiate it or to die of asphyxia ;

“because the swastika of racialism sets itself up as a cross antagonistic to the Cross of Christ.

“To this idolatrous worship we have decided to say an irrevocable No.”

THE DAY OF PRAYER

The national day of prayer has passed. The fact that it was a week-day made its observance the more impressive. The wide-spread participation showed that the call of the King was in tune with the mood of the nation.

The vital question, of course, is whether the observance of the day was the expression of a mood or a new decision of the will.

In so far as the act of dedication was for us a re-orientation of our lives, or the confirmation of the true orientation, in which the centre is not ourselves but God, three important things have happened.

First, we have renewed our trust in the unchanging reality and unconquerable power of moral values, and that, in proportion to its sincerity, is an act of endless significance. The core of the resistance movement in France is the faith that, as M. André Philip put it in his broadcast talk, “a defeated justice is still justice, a crushed freedom

is still freedom, a truth denied by brute force is still a truth." The only means by which the democracies can regain their virility is by recovering their hold on an area of certainty, however small to begin with, in the world of flux.

Secondly, the act involves the abandonment of the easy assumption, which colours many public utterances about the war, that we already know what justice, freedom and truth mean, and that our cause, as we understand and serve it, is well-pleasing to God. There is no reason to suppose that the answer to our prayers will be the fulfilment of our present expectations and desires; it is precisely our expectations that may need to be changed. Many centuries before Christ the religious teachers of Israel warned their contemporaries that the day of the Lord might be darkness and not light. With all our progress in material and technical civilisation we have less understanding than they had of the absolute relentlessness of moral issues.

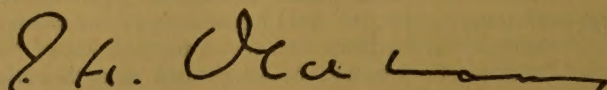
Thirdly, we live henceforward in the confidence that the initiative is in other hands than ours, and that what is asked of us is to respond with everything in us to what God is doing and to His creative summons. I often think of Ruskin's description of Sandro Botticelli's "Fortitude":

"What is chiefly notable in her is—that you would not, if you had to guess who she was, take her for Fortitude at all. Everybody else's Fortitudes announce themselves clearly and proudly. They have tower-like shields and lion-like helmets—and stand firm astride on their legs—and are confidently ready for all comers. Yes, that is your common Fortitude. Very grand, though common. But not the highest, by any means.

"Ready for all comers, and a match for them—thinks the universal Fortitude. But Botticelli's Fortitude is no match, it may be, for any that are coming. Worn, somewhat, and not a little weary; instead of standing ready for all comers, she is sitting—apparently in reverie, her fingers playing restlessly and idly—nay, I think—even nervously, about the hilt of her sword.

"For her battle is not to begin to-day; nor did it begin yesterday. Many a morn and eve have passed since it began; and now—is this to be the ending day of it? And if this—by what manner of end? That is what Sandro's Fortitude is thinking, and the playing fingers about the sword-hilt would fain let it fall, if it might be: and yet how swiftly and gladly will they close on it when the far-off trumpet blows, which she will hear through all her reverie!"

Yours sincerely,



P.S.—CHRISTMAS GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR ABROAD. We shall be making an announcement before long about Christmas gift subscriptions. But those who wish to send the Christian News-Letter to friends abroad as a Christmas gift should let us know *at once*. Please note that subscriptions for abroad can be accepted only for a full year. We can let you have on request a gift leaflet, so that your personal greetings can accompany the first number of the gift subscription.

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